The Theatre & The State

Sir Henry Irving

PN 2042
.I7
Copy 1

2nd COPY,
1898.

APR 1 8 1899

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS.

Chap. ..... Copyright No. .....

Shelf PN 2042
.I7

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

The Theatre and the State

The Theatre in its Relation to the State

By SIR HENRY IRVING

RICHARD G. BADGER & CO.
BOSTON

PN 2042
.I7

29328

Copyright 1898
By Richard G. Badger & Co.

All Rights Reserved

TWO COPIES RECEIVED.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
OFFICE OF
NOV 12 1898
Register of Copyrights.

GEO. H. ELLIS, PRINTER, 141 FRANKLIN STREET, BOSTON

64043
Oct. 31. 98.

The Theatre in its Relation to the State.

IN a well-organized community everything has its purpose and its place; and the whirligig of time gives, in the average, to each its proper value and importance. Thus the record of any specific institution is in miniature the life, or, at least, the reflex of the life, of the community. So it is that, as a nation grows in power, it must grow in wisdom, or else the garden of its prosperity must lack those flowers of advancement and security which have their roots in content and which are watered by hope.

Now in a university,— whose educational process should be as truthful in

quality as it is wide in range,— when we discuss any matter, we must do so with an equal mind. We must, when considering abstract propositions,— no matter how their working out may be hedged in with practical difficulties,— recognize the principles of the greatest and the final utility. Remember that, if premises are correct and argument be exact, what ought to be is the sure forerunner of what is. The wise and noble words of Polonius, in his exordium to his son setting forth to battle with the world, have a larger significance than may be taken in a play, or even regarding the narrow environment of the father's view: —

> "To thine own self be true;
> And it must follow, as the night the day,
> Thou canst not then be false to any man."

I have been compelled to lay stress on exactness, because I am about to deal with a theme which is now and

again subject to violent and unreasoning attacks, chiefly from a class of persons with whom morality has the proportions of an exact science, and to whom toleration should be a final goal of intellectual ambition. Lessons of history should give to thinking people ground for thought. "It is the germ of the future which we seek in the past"; and, if I venture to call your attention to a few isolated matters of recorded history, without pretending for an instant to connect them in any way, I trust that you will not take me as even attempting to suggest an historical narrative, but only as illustrating my theme with indisputable facts.

The same word, "theatre," having been used continuously as designating places of amusement and illustration from ancient to modern times, and under conditions of infinitely varying width, so as to render impossible comparison as to aim, scope, or effort, must

of course be held responsible for much of the prejudice which exists in many places. What, for instance, can be held, in the moral aspect of the case, to be in common between the theatre of pagan Rome — where blood and lust and extravagant pandering to the worse vices of humanity were the memorable features — and the Elizabethan "theatre," where the grave simplicity of the general audience was marked by the exceptional laughter of "some quantity of barren spectators"? Or, further, what has it in common with those well-regulated theatres of to-day, supported in some of the most enlightened of foreign countries in part by State, and maintained among English-speaking peoples by purely individual effort? Nay, further still, what is there in common with the lecture-halls of universities, of colleges and teaching institutions, which still bear the generic name of "theatre"? For all practical pur-

poses we may take the word "theatre," in its popular significance, as a play-house,— a specially arranged place for the representation of the drama. By "drama" I mean drama as I hold it to be, the simulation of life in whatever aspect it may be taken,— serious or humorous or satirical,— but not the mere amusing displays of personal gifts which to-day are so prominent a feature in the relaxation of the people.

From your watch-tower of learning you can watch with unprejudiced eyes the relative forces of education in travail, and see action and reaction each doing its share in the great work of the furtherance of humanity. You can afford to theorize. Men and communities not so effectively isolated from some of the worries and labors of strenuous life may find their aspirations baffled and their moderated efforts crippled by their surroundings. But you can theorize to the full. The past

and the present and the future are all elements in the consideration of what ought to be. Nay, the present, which is, after all, but a moving panorama before our eyes, and the past, which is but the dim shadow of humanity thrown backward by the eternal sunlight, are of lesser importance than the illimitable future which stretches before us, and which is in some degree, however slight, to be moulded by our own efforts.

"When the dumb Hour, clothed in black,
Brings the dreams about my bed,
Call me not so often back,
Silent Voices of the Dead,
Toward the lowland ways behind me
And the sunlight that is gone!
Call me, rather, silent voices,
Forward to the starry track
Glimmering up the heights beyond me,
On, and always on!"

Whatever institution is of collateral, if not direct, good should be at least acknowledged as a factor of beneficence

to the commonweal; and in the history of the country we find that, in the main, this is so. Little by little — sometimes, alas! by very slow and short stages, indeed—legislation throws a protecting arm around such, and even compels or enables the whole community to aid an effort specifically. It is thus that the Royal Academy of Art obtained its charter, and later a local habitation by a grant of public money considered at the time enormous. It is thus that the British Museum and the Department of Science and Art and the growth of the National Gallery have been fostered. Indeed, the plastic arts are, up to the present time, fairly well cared for. It is thus that throughout the length and breadth of the land libraries have been and are being erected by the means of public moneys locally collected. Many of us can remember a time when a great section of the public held that high education would de-

base and disorganize the masses. Indeed, the creation of the School Board system was against strenuous opposition. Even now are to be found very many who hold that any education in the graces of life given in the schools of the poorer classes will have a maleficent effect. But such ideas pass, in good time, into the limbo of forgotten things. Sometimes, when we look back, even at the history of our own time, we wonder how such narrow ideas could have ever had an existence, much less a force. We find, then, this general tendency to increase in many ways the sweetness of life, to relieve its dulness, and lift the minds of the people from the sordid realities of life.

The aim and purpose of the drama is to cultivate the imagination, and through this means to bring home to heart and mind the lessons which tend to advance the race. Imagination is one of the most potent factors of hu-

man progress. It stimulates effort, it enlarges the bounds of thought, it creates for the individual new realms of possibility, it clears away the intellectual mists of sordid reality, it harmonizes the seeming divergences in the great scheme of creation, it reconciles by its restful change poor humanity to the wearisome details of life, it brightens, invigorates, and freshens the jaded faculties. To the suffering it brings anodyne to pain, for the weary it creates possibilities of rest and repose, to the vigorous it affords a healthy and noble stimulation, generous in aim, immeasurable in scope, and myriad in detail. Surely, in the well-being of a nation, all that tends to such a wholesome and useful end is of prime importance. Life on its practical side is, under the best of circumstances, so hard, so full of dangers, so restless in its demands of work to fulfil the ends of need or ambition, that the addition

of grace and beauty and the serenity that comes from happiness are excellences of unapproachable worth. In the ever-widening efforts of beneficent government such ends should be, and in the main are, borne in mind; and perhaps the greatest evidences of the civic advance of our time are afforded by the rise and multiplication of works which aid and encourage thought and grace and sweetness. The sweeping advance of science seems to open men's eyes to the many benefits of art; and the wide-spreading knowledge of art seems to shed its own enlightenment on the progressive needs of life, whence the discoveries of science have mainly their source. You here, in a university whose very name implies a recognition of all branches of knowledge, must rejoice when you think of the progress of humanity, which, though eternal, moves faster with the passing of the years.

The theatre must always be an indirect mechanism of teaching. Its work must be in the main transcendental; for mere realism is insufficient to stimulate the imagination or to rouse the sensibilities, or the emotions. Now, in order to effect its object, the theatre must be a piece of very complete and elaborate organization. In fact, an inner knowledge of its working shows it to be one of the most difficult and varied pieces of mechanism of which human effort is capable. The mere study of the necessities and resources of theatre art — the art of illusion — should give the theatre, as an educational medium, a proper place in State economy. Just think for a moment: a comprehensive art effort which consolidates into one entity, which has an end and object and purpose of its own, all the elements of which any or all of the arts and industries take cognizance, — thought, speech, passion, humor,

pathos, emotion, distance, substance, form, size, color, time, force, light, illusion to each or all of the senses, sound, tone, rhythm, music, motion. Can such a work be undertaken lightly or with inadequate preparation? Why, the mere patience necessary for the production of a play might take a high place in the marvels of human effort. Remember I am not speaking now of the art of acting; for this art alone, which is, after all, the purpose of the playhouse, is one *sui generis*, and which requires the labor of years to master. Surely, a medium of education such as this, whose end — unless we accept the dictum that to arouse emotion without the exercise of corresponding effort is immoral — is the training of the sterner and loftier and rarer emotions and passions of men, and which in its own doing necessitates thought, study, constant and unvarying labor and self-

devotion, should have fitting recognition. It is hardly sufficient that in the economy of the State such exercises with their economic difficulties should be left entirely to the chance of personal enterprise. To cultivate sympathy, that sweetener of the toils and troubles of life, that high-souled helpmate of endeavor; to widen the understanding of it; to train the minds of the young to its beneficial exercise; and to stimulate in all high and unselfish feeling,—is a good office in the government of men. And for this end I say the theatre ever makes.

When we come to think that coexistent with all great public movements have been great waves of imaginative effort, we can well understand that action and sentiment, which is a child of imagination, are closely correlated. With the waking of England at the close of the sixteenth century, when her exploring ships

opened up new worlds, and her merchants and her adventurers swept the known and the unknown seas, adding to the national as well as the individual wealth, and enlarging the bounds of the national domain, came the rise of her artistic cult, beginning with one of its greatest glories, the rise of the drama,—the work of Shakespeare; for Shakespeare's work was not only literary, it was done for the stage. With civil dissension came cessation of imaginative work of the highest kind, until, the turmoil of party strife abating, political satire was followed by efforts of pure imagination, by the ever-growing importance of art and art methods, by the rise of the novel and the recrudescence of the stage. From then till now the increase has been perpetual. Art of every kind has flourished. New arts and new phases or developments of art have arisen. Painting and sculpture, whose products a century ago were

represented by scores, are now numbered by thousands. Music has increased throughout the country in every conceivable phase. There are many great musical academies and a Royal College of Music. Sculpture in many and varied forms seems to have restored some of the glories of the past, and there is manifest an ever-widening possibility of materials for the sculptor's art. Architecture in its domestic aspect has become a new art, and houses of to-day show sometimes the extraordinary advance from the crude utility of even a few years ago. Even the handicrafts which follow on higher artistic effort have developed to an immense degree; and the beauties of interior decoration in both form and color — of furniture, papers, glass, plate, china, and all the paraphernalia of domestic life — are apparent to all. The beauty of books — printing and binding — has wonderfully increased.

Even the conventions of dress have been enlarged; and there are, throughout the varying fashions, possibilities of individual taste which were unknown in a less liberal age. As to the development of literature, your librarians can tell best of that, with their groans concerning overladen shelves and their entreaties for more space by which to cope with the increasing rush of volumes. Even granting that a large proportion of the works published are not of greatest worth, the residue is a noble tribute to the zeal and taste, the brains and energy, of the race; and, when we think that of the large proportion of those works which are of a purely imaginative kind, we may well accept the manifest conclusion that imagination plays no little part in the life, the history, and the development of mankind.

In the midst of these many developments of specific art, let us see how has

fared the one institution which makes use of them all,— the theatre. We shall, I think, find that through good and ill it has held its place, and can show as high a ratio of progress as anything else in the State. As a practical working institution, the theatre in England dates from the time of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. And in that age we find by analogy its place fairly marked by the records of the statute book and the royal ordinances. There is a common idea that actors are by law considered as vagabonds, the historic basis being a contemplation of the statutes regarding vagrancy. These statutes, crude and general in terms as were all or most of the early enactments, having been made and renewed between the twenty-third year of Edward III. and the fifth year of Queen Elizabeth, were variously repealed and consolidated in 1572, the act being the 14th Elizabeth, chapter

5. In this act, strolling players unlicensed are certainly classed among "rogues, vagabonds, and sturdie beggars," who are in the preamble of the act termed "outrageous enemies to the common weall," the penalty on conviction being "that then immediatelie he or she shall be adjudged to be grievouslie whipped, and burnt through the gristle of the right eare with a hot yron of the compasse of an inch about," —a punishment only to be abated by some responsible householder taking him or her into service for a full year under proper recognizance. A second offence became a felony. The clause of the act "expressing what person and persons shall bee so extended within this branch to be rogues, vagabonds, and sturdie beggars," includes the following: "pretended proctors, gamesters, persons 'faining themselvs to have knowledge in phisnomie, palmestrie, or other abused sciences,' quasi-

laborers who will not work, unlicensed jugglers, pedlars, tinkers, pettie chapmen, counterfeetours and users of licenses and passports, shipmen pretending losses at sea." The following inclusion deals directly with the subject of actors: "all fencers, beare wardes, common players in interludes and minstrels, not belonging to any baron of the realme, or towards any honorable personage of greater degree . . . which shall wander abroad and have not licenses of two Justices of the Peace of the least, whereof one bee of the quorum where and in what shire they shall happen to wander."

This certainly marks an epoch and has a distinct bearing upon what has become lately a sort of shibboleth, "the social status of the actor," of the time. It must, however, be remembered that at that period communities were small and constables few, and any incursion of a body of unaccredited

persons was apt to create alarm, even if not in itself a real element of danger. At that time, too, actors complying with existing regulations had a secure position of their own. The countenance of the court was given to players who were then, as now, under the jurisdiction of the lord chamberlain; and, as is noticeable, the protection of a great lord saved the strolling players from the odium of arrest, with its grievous penalties, those only being liable who avoided fulfilling the conditions laid down by the law. It must also be remembered that in all the Sumptuary Statutes "players in their interludes" were exempt from the penalties of wearing clothes out of their degree. All things are, however, relative; and a better illustration can hardly be taken of the real meaning of the vagrant classification of the statutes — certainly, one which will come home to you who belong to this great univer-

sity, which then, as now, basked in the full sun of national honor — than another item in the category of "rogues, vagabonds, and sturdie beggars" laid down in the act: —

> All schollers of the Universities of Oxford or Cambridge that go about begging, not being authorized under the seale of the said universities by the commissarie, chancellor, or vice-chancellor of the same.

Gentlemen, you will note that, if the Elizabethan player on tour had to submit to dangers and indignities that compete with the modern perils of railway travel and undisciplined hotel service, he was not alone in his trial. Then — as I have the honor to do to-day — the player kept company with the scholar. Well, the times have changed. Under more favorable social conditions the scholar and the player alike may now follow their bent under less harrowing circumstances than then

obtained. When, however, laws fall into desuetude, they may often hang on unrepealed. "What is every one's business is no one's business"; and, though the vagrant conditions of the players were so changed that they themselves did not even know their legal obligations regarding travelling license, the craft was preserved in "the rogues' category" at each renewal of the Vagrant Act until well into the present century, when some Parliamentary draughtsman, less hide-bound than his predecessors, discreetly drew his pen through the obsolete clause. In this respect the scholar, more in touch with legislation than the player, had long before achieved the same result.

The growth of the theatre as an acknowledged institution in the State kept, in some degree, pace with the onward movement of the eighteenth century. Personal violence toward

actors offending individual susceptibilities became superseded by statutory regulation and redress. Thus the cudgelling of a player by an offended Minister of State was followed by the Act of 1736 (10 George II., Cap. 28), which appears under a ponderous title: "An Act to explain and amend so much of an Act made in the Twelfth year of *Queen Anne*, intituled 'An Act for reducing the Laws relating to Rogues, Vagabonds, Sturdie Beggars, and Vagrants, and sending them whither they ought to be sent,' as relates to Common Players of Interludes."

This act, which formally recognized the existence of proper theatres, provided for the licensing of plays, and regulated the responsibilities of actors, held the statute book for more than a century. It was superseded, and its material provisions were embodied in the Act of 1843 (6 and 7 Victoria, Cap. 68), which is still in force.

The above-mentioned legislation is not to be confused with the legislation affecting music halls, which began in 1747 (25 George II., Cap. 36), and has run on widely different lines from legislation regarding theatres proper up to the present time.

Still, this legal consideration has been rather repressive than helpful; and the most that can be said is that the State, up to now, has, at the best, been indifferent. It reminds one of the prayer of the sailor alone on an ice floe with a bear, when the moment for the joining issue had come: "Lord, if you don't help me, don't help the bear!" The general result has been that the theatre, unaided in any way, has worked out its own destiny. That this has worthily followed, where it did not lead, the advance of public enlightenment is shown by successive acts. For instance, Garrick relegated to the street the rowdiness of the footmen's gallery, while

other public or quasi-public places long afterward tolerated the nuisance. Macready abolished the promenade in his theatre, thus purging the playhouse from an evil which has continued to exist in other places to this day. As to the tone of the acted drama, this has always been more or less guided by the public taste. "The drama's laws the drama's patrons give," is a forceful, if meagre, statement of a fact, it being always borne in mind that there are always several parties to the growth of public opinion, and that in their clashing is found the dynamic element of advance. The playhouse has often been the arena of the strife of public sentiments, and its changes the resultant of opposing forces. For instance, the libertine freedom of the court, which had produced the effort, received a rebuff from the body of an audience when a comedy of Mrs. Aphra Behn, with the ever-popular Nell Gwynne,

was hissed off the stage on the first night of its production. In our history we have read of books having been burned by the common hangman just as the author was pilloried, and the history of an unworthy play shows an analogy. The justice of the public is swift and strong. In fine, the theatre must ever be to a very great degree the reflex of the life of the people,— so long, at least, as Nature keeps within her accustomed course. For its efforts must run parallel to the workings of human life and human needs,— ambitions, hopes, fears, and passions. Oliver Wendell Holmes says, "Philosophers may argue how they will, but two things they cannot argue away,— the blood in men's veins and the milk in women's breasts."

I before hinted at a limitation of the drama in the sense in which I have used it, so that, in speaking of the theatre proper as the home of the

drama, it must be understood that I limit the use of the word accordingly. Although the purpose of the individual in the enterprise of any one theatre may be to amuse the public, and in such a way as to advance the prosperity of the adventurer, the purpose of the theatre in the abstract is not so restricted. The purpose of things has many aspects; and, though the range of one who holds some part in it may be limited, the consensus of outlook embraces the world. The lessons of life are not always didactic, and perhaps the most patent are those which are not formulated in books or taught in schools. Human nature is so constituted that it has inherent the natural elements of logic,— an understanding of the laws of cause and effect; and, when once the premises are set forth, the result is pretty sure to be adequately arrived at. Experience is largely the teacher of complex matters; and, as the

opportunities of civilization and the serenity of domestic life do not usually allow of the experience of the more rugged and dominating passions of our nature,— which are nevertheless latently existing,— it is wise in the economy of things that a fitting knowledge of evil potentialities as well as good should be afforded. Warning-posts have their place as well as sign-posts in the many cross-roaded highways of life. Nevertheless, questions of the passions should in all imaginative work be very carefully dealt with; and it is here that we may fear for the effects of that luxuriant and reckless quasi-realism at which certain imaginative writers, both for the stage and the library, aim. Questions of taste and decorum are perhaps more closely interlocked with morality and State prudence than would be at once admitted by the determined sweeper-away of landmarks. As one of the most expeditious of lesson carriers, the

theatre should be subject to all wise restraints; for evil as well as good has its machinery of advance. The wisdom of many governments has enacted laws and made regulations for the general good. Books and pictures, songs and photographs,— in fact, every phase of imaginative and imitative effort,— are subject to certain restraints. The operations of police discipline will always be necessary among the children of Adam. I mention this phase of the question, lest any one should think that I wish to set forth that in an imperfect world, where fallibility is almost of the essence of things, there is only one perfect institution,— the theatre. I simply wish to convey the idea that the reflex of human life is not, and does not require to be, more perfect than its archetype,— that the mirror picture would not be true, were it not to set forth the faults of the original. I claim for the theatre no exemption

from the failings of any organized effort. I wish no exemption from the operation of those laws of restraint wisely ordained for the common good; but I do claim for the theatre that it may be, and is, a potent means of teaching great truths and furthering the spread of education of the higher kind,— the knowledge of the scope and working of human character.

"Know, then, thyself. Presume not God to scan.
The proper study of mankind is man."

In fine, I venture to assert that, whereas the State should exercise an influence, ranging between control and aid, on all matters which have an indirect as well as those having a direct bearing on its welfare and its progress, it should be even jealously mindful for the true good of those institutions which have power to touch the hearts of the people, to hold their sentiments, to awaken and stimulate their imagination,

and so to aid in turning lofty thoughts into acts of equal worth.

In this category the theatre is an item of vast potentialities,—a natural evolution of the needs and thoughts and wishes of the people, an institution which has progressed for good unaided by the State, and which in future should distinctly be in some degree encouraged by the State or by municipalities. How exactly this is to be accomplished remains to be seen; but of this I am sure,—that the grave consideration of such questions as these in such a place as this is the forerunner of their ultimate settlement. What should be is ever the sure-footed forerunner of what is. Remember, I pray you, that you must no more judge an institution as to its final utility, so long as it is existing under adverse or inadequate conditions, than you should take an ill-reared or ignorant child as a type of the highest culture of which humanity

is capable. Man, though made in the image of his Maker, is compact of many neutralizing excellences and defects; and we must not expect from the kaleidoscopic groupings of such imperfect items a flawless work. As the theatre must deal with the eternal conditions of humanity, so must it ever have weaknesses which result from human imperfection. But, as humanity has its nobler part, so, too, the theatre has capabilities of good which are as illimitable as the progress of man.

BOTOLPH CLASSICS.

A series of small volumes selected from the masterpieces of the world's poets; artistically bound after designs by Mr. Frank Bird Masters, and the text enclosed by colored decorations of great charm. Each volume in a box. 12mo. Cloth, $1.00 each.

NOW READY.

1. *Certain Maxims of Hafiz.* By Rudyard Kipling.
2. *The Dream of Eugene Aram.* By Thomas Hood.
3. *The Raven.* By Edgar Allan Poe.

Other volumes in preparation.

NOV 12 1898

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
0 020 995 958 6